

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Place of the Rural Home and the Rural Community in American Life*

By Mark A. Dawber

"The Farm -- Best Home of the Family -- Main Source of National Wealth -- Foundation of Civilized Society -- The Natural Providence."

These words, emblazoned on the front of the Union Station in Washington, D. C., announce to America a fact that is unfortunately little known and less heeded, the continued ignoring of which is our nation's most serious peril.

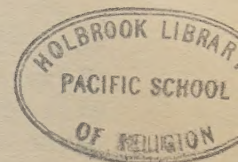
The important emphasis in this remarkable declaration is that of the home. Everything hinges on our ability to maintain in America something of that basis of stability, economic, social, moral, spiritual, that will insure the continuity of this institution. To date in our history the farm has proved itself as the one vocation, or better still, way of life that has provided those elements that go into the creation, conservation and continuity of the home and the family. Whatever happens to destroy these values is a matter of serious concern for our national life.

The first law of life is that of survival. Nations, as also individuals, are deeply involved in the process. Whenever a nation has allowed its farm life to decay, that nation has itself deteriorated. The biological destiny of a nation is vested in its farm homes. The problems that now confront us in America and that are making it difficult and impossible to maintain a farm owner and yeoman on the farm, the trends toward tenancy and seasonal labor, are such that they should arouse the interest of all worthy citizens.

The Rural Home a Spiritual Force

But it is not merely a matter of biological significance that concerns us. It is on the basis of its spiritual value that the rural home must be considered. The final test of the success of any country church will be found in the homes that it is supposed to serve. The difference between a defeated and a victorious church is a thoroughly Christianized home life. Whenever the church gives the same attention to the organization of its families as it gives to the massing of its individuals, it will recover its power and multiply its efficiency. The church loses enough strength at this point in each generation to evangelize the world. The rural family is the heart of the nation. Out of its throbbings come all the currents of feeling, habit and ideals that will determine the quality of the race. Here the world began; here the world continues to begin -- born anew with each generation.

*An address by Dr. Mark A. Dawber, Executive Secretary of the Home Missions Council, given at the Illinois Farm and Home Week, Urbana, January 1940.



The church that would be a success must face the problem of keeping intact the home. One of the most profitable things that any church in the country could do would be to gather together at least once a year all the fathers and mothers of the community for the express purpose of reminding them that they are co-partners with God in the creative process. This is the first step in the program of home development -- we must first restore the home ideal.

Then, of course, I have in mind the cultural aspects of home life. More attractive buildings, more beautiful surroundings, better gardens, more flowers, a place for the children to play, a home planned so that being a wife and a mother will be made as joyous as it is possible to make it. If there is any group of people anywhere that deserves to have the best there is in the way of home equipment, home beauty, home comforts, it is the farm women, and any church that is engaged in the work of creating better homes is among the churches that can claim to be successful.

The Rural Community as a Religious Unit

It seems strange that it should be necessary to argue for the place of the rural community in our national life. But so it is. The time is past ripe when the whole nation should be made more conscious of the rural community as a significant religious unit in society. The community ideal of which we speak cannot be achieved in the cities; it belongs to the country. It requires a sufficient number of people who know one another, who are able to share with each other the services they can contribute and to build within the area of their common experiences and daily life a satisfying society. In his valuable little pamphlet on his Philosophy of Rural Life, the dean of rural sociologists, Dr. Charles J. Galpin, makes the following comments on this community factor. "I shall not attempt to limit or define the 'community' to be involved in this planning. Let it be any group of rural people whose active interests are, or are to be, binding them together in thought and action for the future." The community of the future will be rural in spirit and not urban.

The Rural Community in a Developing Democracy

May I now say a word as to the importance of this community from the point of view of a developing democracy, and as a means whereby we might at least conserve the best in our democratic philosophy, so far as its ideals and traditions have value for an ongoing democratic society.

As I look at our cities I become very pessimistic in the matter of the future of democracy. Our cities do not have the community basis that can give to us the kind of democratic society of which I speak, and which I feel sure we all sincerely desire.

The rural community of twenty-five to fifty years ago, with all its provincialism and narrowness conceded, was the foundation of American democracy and the best safeguard for a citizenship that cherished true freedom based upon social responsibility. This older and limited community has passed and in its passing our democracy has been weakened. To develop ways and means to reinforce the larger geographical community that is now upon us, with the social ideals that will represent a community spirit, will have a profound in-

fluence upon the future of our democracy, and will constitute the best insurance for its continuity as a democracy, purified and strengthened to pass on to those who shall succeed us.

If there were no other reason, this one is sufficient to demand that the Protestant churches in rural communities shall find some basis upon which to unite their efforts in order to conserve the community basis for democracy. Wherever democracy is out or waning, there the church is in peril. The community, democracy and the Christian church are a trio that will stand or fall together. Christianity is in peril today because of many forces that are operating against it, but at no point is it in greater danger than in our decaying democracy. In the United States our democratic heritage roots in the community basis of life that prevailed in the days of Washington and Jefferson. The Jeffersonian democratic ideal was the outgrowth of those relationships, including the sense of utter independence on the one hand and of social responsibility on the other hand, that were the natural experience of the simple rural community of that day.

It is true that we must accept a very different geographical basis for the community of today. It is also true that we are dealing with a very different set of factors in the general life of the community and the social relations of rural people, but these are only added reasons for the necessity of preserving and enlarging the democratic basis of community life. With all its changes, and with all the disrupting forces that have penetrated rural life during the past twenty-five years admitted, the town and country field is still the one hope that is left to us to preserve and develop the community as a fundamental basis for democracy.

There is no hope that democracy can be developed in our cities, because there is no community basis for city life. In the cities people are organized upon the basis of interests. Many of these interests are divisive, they are oftentimes conflicting interests, largely class interests. Even the church in the city is a class institution. This division is taking place also within the denominational structure of city churches. This has also taken place in some of the smaller towns, and is one of the most serious obstacles to the community spirit which is so essential for democratic organization and action. We repeat that one of the most urgent needs at the present moment is a single front in religion, in order to preserve that basis for democracy which is so essential for religion and the church.

The implications of this for the church must be very apparent today as we observe what is happening to the church in those countries where democracy has been banished. Religion whether Roman Catholic, Protestant or Jewish demands the democratic foundation of government in order to survive. The Christian religion, in particular, makes certain demands upon its adherents that are inescapable and which are impossible to achieve in any other atmosphere than democracy. Christianity has given to the world two great concepts of God and man: one the value of a person and his supreme place in any social order; the other, the universality of the human race, or, if you prefer, "the brotherhood of man." There is no place in the totalitarian scheme of things for such concepts as these. There is no place for the sacredness of a person -- the State is supreme. There is no place for the universality of the human race -- only for one race, the Aryan. It is therefore perfectly consistent for the Nazi Germans to destroy all the literature and the philosophies that have been

founded upon the Christian doctrines of the sacredness of a person and the brotherhood of man. Nazi Germany knows full well that it cannot build a totalitarian state if the mass of German people, and in particular German youth, are brought up on these basic doctrines of the Christian religion. Hence, if we are thinking of the future of the church from the point of view only of enlightened self-interest (although God forbid that should ever be so), we would strain ourselves to maintain our democracy.

The Importance of Rural Education

To restore then to our rural people something of the community basis of life is a national imperative. It is important not only from the angle of rural life and the welfare of rural society, but for all of society. In this regard a word needs to be said about the importance of training rural people for democracy. We have stated that the cities do not have any community basis, hence the difficulty of training city people for a democratic society. But many of the boys and girls now in our rural communities will be the citizens of our cities tomorrow, so that it is of the essence of good statesmanship, also of good educational strategy, to lay the foundations of democracy deep and firm in the educational structure of our rural institutions, particularly by the training of rural youth for the opportunities and responsibilities of the development of the community itself. A political democracy gains its rightful power from the consent of local self-governing units. A political democracy thrives only when its citizens are alive, alert, well informed and actively participating in community life. Failure to recognize this and to provide for it in our educational institutions is one of the unpardonable sins against our boasted democracy. It is highly important that our program of education in the public schools of rural communities shall immediately be directed toward this basic need in education for citizenship.

Let us not delude ourselves into believing that the things I have been pleading for in terms of the home and the community are going to take place just because they are right and good and necessary. I have long ago discovered that reforms will not take place just because they ought to. Life is too grim and human nature too selfish to allow one to proceed with the assumption that these things will be done because they ought to be done. These ideals of home and community must find more definite rootage in the program of the public schools. The changes that have taken place, that are making such drastic inroads into the home and community life, have come so swiftly that we seem to have been carried along with them, without much chance to understand them, with no means to measure them in relation to the succession of events. We are now just beginning to realize the force and the strength of the storm and to see its social wreckage in the rural home and the rural community.

We are just now beginning to comprehend the nature of these vast changes, to find words and phrases for them, and to put them down so that we and our children can see and understand them. We are at least beginning to get our minds clear about them, and soon we shall be able to demonstrate them and explain them to the children in our schools. This is the one immediate urgent imperative of educational statesmanship. We have not given our children a chance to discover the world of the home and the community in which they live and in which most of them will continue to live, or at least in one like it. The education of children and youth must be related in a more practical way to the home and community ideal. Human society began with the family and the community. It must continue there if it is to continue at all. It is in the family group that the first experiences must be understood and worked out in terms of restraints, disciplines, and self-sacrifice, without which human society is impossible. It is in the life of the community that youth will find these family experiences enlarged in terms of the more fundamental prejudices and collective social influences. Here it is that our democracy must be relearned, purified and enlarged, generation after generation. Here it is that our democracy will find its greatest safeguards against the infection of old racial and national hatreds and jealousies, old superstitions, bad mental habits, and base interpretations of life.

Conclusion

So I plead for the rural home and the rural community -- for an understanding of their significance and a place of greater recognition in our national life. I call upon all institutions that claim to be interested in human welfare and, in particular, the school and the church, to arouse themselves in a new crusade to enable America to rediscover its soul in the rural home and the rural community.

I like to think that across the length and breadth of America there are countless homes and communities where this is still true. I like to think that there are still homes, thousands of them, mostly farm homes, that are still the center and hope of life, where the influence of a loving wife and godly mother is still supreme; nothing in the whole wide world can be a substitute for these. I like to think that there are still farmers in America, thousands of them who, when the day's work is done and the cattle are safely housed in the barn, like to walk over their farms and to feel the touch of good mother earth beneath their feet and, as they wend their homeward way, fix their eyes on the dawning stars and are content. They have discovered God.

Upon such homes and such communities depends the destiny of America. To this end let those of us who are here highly resolve to dedicate our lives anew, believing that this is the most significant contribution that we can make.